

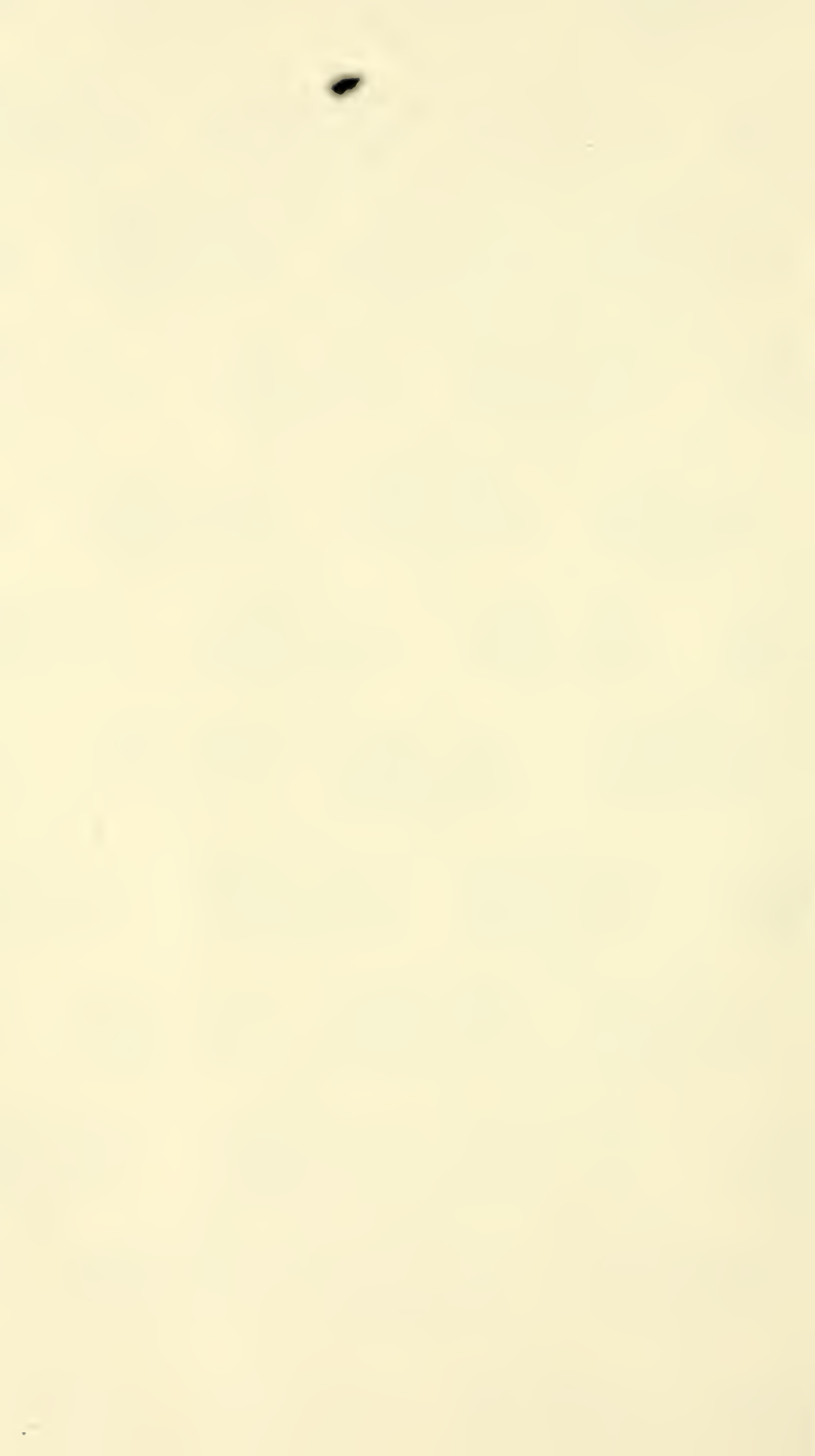
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Harding, Warren Gamaliel

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ADDRESS
OF THE
PRESIDENT OF THE
UNITED STATES

AT THE
LAYING OF THE CORNER STONE
OF THE NATIONAL VICTORY
MEMORIAL BUILDING
ERECTED BY THE
GEORGE WASHINGTON
MEMORIAL ASSOCIATION

Washington, D. C., November 14, 1921

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ADDRESS.

There begins here to-day the fulfillment of one of the striking contemplations contained in the last will of the Father of his Country. It is an impressive fact, worthy of our especial thought, that in the century and a half since Washington became the leader, the heart and soul, of its struggle for independence and unity, this nation has so many times found occasions to record devotion to the precepts which he laid down for its guidance. So to-day, after more than a century's delay, we are come to pay tribute to the foresight which first encouraged and endowed the institution here established—an institution which is to be alike a monument to those who sacrificed in a noble cause, and a beacon to shed afar the light of useful knowledge and grateful understanding among men. For I need not remind you that Washington, in his last will and testament, first conceived the idea which we here see shaping into forms that shall combine loftiest sentiment and truest utility. He proposed, and gave a bequest to found an institution to disseminate learning, culture, and a proper understanding of right principles in government. In furtherance of that purpose, patriotic women and men have made possible the institution of which we are now to lay the corner. Very properly they have conceived Washington's impelling thought to have been a gathering place for Americans, where American minds could meet in fruitful exchanges. We can better appraise this thought when we recall the limited publicity, the slow transportation, and the difficult process of translating public sentiment of his day.

Mindful of this inspiration for the achievement of to-day, I have thought it might be well to direct attention to some phases of Washington's character which are not so well known as they deserve and which are wonderfully set forth in the provisions of his last will and testament.

It has seemed to me that our studies of Washington have been too much from those public sides from which we view him as the military chief, the inspired leader of the colonies, the statesman and guide of constitution-making times, the welding force which hammered fragments of communities into a great Nation; as the first President; and as the author of that body of domestic and foreign policies which he bequeathed in his farewell address. All this we know; but we have not gathered all of inspiration that waits to reward the contemplation of the virtues and ideals that made

Washington, on his private and personal side, a very model of good citizenship.

Perhaps there has never been a nation which has owed so much to one man as our Republic owes to Washington. As a youth, filled with the spirit of adventure and exploration, he came early to know the colonies and our nearest Northwest. In the epoch of the Seven Years' War, or as we call it, the French and Indian War, his leadership was perhaps the contribution which saved this continent to assured dominion of the English-speaking colonists. Indeed, I think it may be said that if on the one side Washington was the great personal force that wrenched apart the two chief branches of the English-speaking race, he was on the other the greatest personal factor in saving this continent to Anglo-Saxon domination; and in doing that he contributed very greatly to making possible the wide-flung family of English-speaking nations. If as leader of the revolting colonies in '76, this time aided by France, he tore them from the grasp of England, it is equally true that two decades earlier he had saved them from the possible domination of France. I am sure that to-day our faithful friends and trusted Allies of France and England alike would agree that in both cases, viewed in the light of subsequent events, he served mankind well.

With all these things we are reasonably familiar. We know his career as organizer and leader of colonial forces in the Seven Years' War: as generalissimo of the War of Independence: as chairman of the Constitutional Convention; as first President, as author of that farewell address, whose fund of wisdom has contributed so much to shape our national policies even to this day.

But among the documents which attest his wisdom, there is one to which little study has been given. I mean his last will and testament. On an occasion such as brings us here to-day it is not inappropriate to direct attention for a few moments to this remarkable instrument.

Washington was not only a great soldier and a great statesman: he was also a man of great business affairs, and an eminent humanitarian. Provident and always methodical, he amassed a fortune, which has been rated by many as the greatest of his time in all the country. Had it been his desire to found a monumental estate, the vast tracts of carefully selected land of which he was possessed, and in whose future value he had the utmost confidence, would have constituted its ample foundation. But plainly it was not his belief that society is best served by the transmission from generation to generation of such imposing aggregates of wealth. Therefore his will, after devising minor and largely sentimental bequests to many relatives and friends, directed that the residuary estate should be divided into

23 equal shares, to be distributed among the heirs whom he named. Thus it comes about that an estate which, if held together and wisely administered, might have become very large, was deliberately so distributed that in a few years its entity was gone and its portions had been absorbed into the general body of the country's wealth. If that process of disintegration and absorption involved some loss, it is probable that in the sum of results the Nation was gainer by the policy of Washington.

Washington as a model citizen shines forth with a peculiar radiance from this last testament. The first provision is that his debts shall be paid promptly. All the world needs the example of kept obligations. The second item makes generous provision for his wife; and then comes the direction that at her death all his slaves shall be given freedom; that those who need it shall be cared for by his estate; and that they all "are to be taught to read and write, and are to be brought up to some useful occupation."

Next follow devises of funds to aid education of poor or orphaned children, and for the endowment of a "University in a central part of the United States." Another specific bequest goes to Liberty Hall Academy, now Washington and Lee University, at Lexington, Va. A list of debtors are forgiven their debts. To each of five nephews he gave one of his swords with "an injunction not to unsheath them for the purpose of shedding blood except it be for self-defense or in defense of their country and its rights, and in the latter case to keep them unsheathed and prefer falling with them in their hands to the relinquishment thereof." There is no selection of words wherewith more eloquently to express the full duty and obligation of a good citizen to his country! Let us be thankful that the spirit of that injunction has been borne in upon the Nation he founded and animates it even to this day.

As a charter of good citizenship and patriotic purposes this last will and testament has been an inspiration many times to me. I commend its thoughtful reading to whoever would emulate his example. Indeed, as we are gathered here, representatives of a grateful and reverent Nation, to signalize the consummation of one more public beneficence inspired by him, I can think of nothing more appropriate than to urge the study of the Farewell Address and the last will and testament, as complements of each other. Neither of them can be fully appreciated without the other. The Farewell Address was the final adjuration of the soldier, the statesman, the founder. The will and testament was the last word of the Christian citizen, the loving husband, the devoted kinsman,—and the provident man of business. Studied together, they afford a complete key to the exalted character of one whom all mankind has

learned to revere. Beyond that, I am prone to believe they contain a chart by which the captains and pilots of a world in distress, seeking harborage from battering storms and raging, unknown deeps, might well lay the course of civilization itself.

Within a brief century and a half, the American people under Washington's inspiration have created a great Nation, added to the dominion of liberty and of opportunity, and, we may hope, afforded a helpful example to the world. It has not been accomplished without heavy sacrifices. At fearful cost we had to wipe out an ambiguity in the constitution and reestablish union where disunion threatened. In a conflict well-nigh as wide as the world, we were called to draw the sword for humanity and the relief of oppression. Very recently we have paused to speak tribute to those who sacrificed in that struggle for civilization's preservation. We can not too often or too earnestly repeat that tribute; and we consecrate this institution as a memorial and a shrine, in reminder to all the future of the services and sacrifices of our heroes of the World War.



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